

BECOMING A TRUSTEE

What Is a Library Board of Trustees?

The commonwealth of Virginia places the governance of the vast majority of public libraries with citizens of the community, organized as a library board of trustees. As a result of this statutory process, board members are public officials and the powers delegated to them are a public trust.

Library boards have both legal and practical responsibilities. They are responsible for carrying out their legal duties correctly and, consequently, are accountable under law for actions they take.

Also of great importance is the board's role in representing the total community. As such, the board serves as a vital link between the library and the community, bringing the public's point of view and the needs of the community to the development of responsive library service. This is equally true whether the board is governing or advisory. The role of board members is seldom easy because of the varied composition of communities—the different interests, concerns, and social and economic levels that must be considered. Reconciling this diversity by representing the total community is the greatest accomplishment to which a board can aspire.

Selection and Appointment of Trustees

Most library trustees are appointed by the local governing body or bodies. This process is too important to be left to chance because the future development of the library may well depend on the caliber of trustees who are appointed to serve.

The appointing officials should be informed concerning the qualifications and duties of board members. When vacancies occur, the library board and the library director should be prepared to identify potential trustees who are active, informed, and interested library supporters.

No trustee should serve on the board indefinitely. While it is often helpful to have continuity and experience, it is even more beneficial to have new ideas, fresh approaches, and diverse interests.

Size of the Board

- Not less than five members (*Code of Virginia*). Five to nine members is recommended.
- The appointing authority determines the number to be appointed. The library board may request that the number be increased or decreased if it seems advisable.
- Regional library contracts should specify the number of members to be appointed from each jurisdiction.

Method of Appointment

Various methods are used in determining how the library board is appointed. In some cases, each member of the governing body will appoint a member from his/her district. In other cases, the members are selected at large. There is usually some effort made to have a geographical representation on the board.

Terms of Appointment

- Initially, board members must serve staggered terms of office in order to provide continuity of service.
- Trustees are appointed for four-year terms.
- Trustees of regional library boards are limited by state law to not more than two consecutive terms but are eligible for reappointment after an interval of one term.
- County, town, and city library boards, as well as boards of nonprofit corporations, are not limited by law as to the number of terms a member may serve. Most libraries, however, follow the practice of not more than two consecutive terms.
- Board members may be removed by the governing body for misconduct or neglect of duty, including poor attendance.

Vacancies

Vacancies for unexpired terms should be filled as soon as possible in the same manner in which members are regularly chosen. In the case of regional libraries, a trustee appointed to fill an unexpired term is eligible to be reappointed the number of terms specified in the bylaws.

Compensation

Members may not receive salaries or compensation other than necessary expenses actually incurred. The *Code of Virginia* provides an exception to Fairfax County, which may pay members of the library board such compensation as it may deem proper.

Qualifications of Trustees

Each trustee brings to the board certain strengths, skills, talents, and personal experience that uniquely serve the library. The board should represent a broad spectrum of community interests, occupations, and geographic areas. Such diversity assures that the library will serve the total community.

It is impossible to represent all the divergent interests of the service area on the board at the same time, but over a period of years the representation should rotate to include as many segments of the population as possible. A well-balanced board can bring in less-experienced members who will provide new viewpoints.

Competencies necessary to fulfill board duties should also be present in the overall composition of the board. Collectively, the board should strive to have:

- rapport with the entire community;
- occupational diversity;
- political acumen and influence;
- business management/financial experience;
- legal knowledge;
- diversity in age, race, and sex; and
- varied personal backgrounds.

Appointing authorities and individual candidates should be given a written statement of the duties and responsibilities of membership on the library board. An interested potential board member should not accept if lack of time or other commitments prevent full participation.

Effective trustees are citizens who have:

- interest in the library and the community;
- time to devote to board responsibilities;
- awareness of the library's role in the community as a center of information, culture, recreation, and lifelong learning;
- knowledge of the community and its diversity;
- ability to think and plan creatively, to question objectively, and to carry out plans effectively;
- skill in establishing policies for effective and efficient operation of the library;
- sound judgment, a sense of fiscal responsibility, and political awareness;
- willingness to represent the library at meetings and public functions; good communication skills; the ability to relate to the public; and
- interest in working with local, state, and national library leaders and trustees to improve library service on all levels.

WHAT DOES A TRUSTEE DO?

Your job is:

To Know

- The program and needs of the library in relation to the community;
- Library services and resources available locally and statewide;
- Information needs and interests of the community;
- Services and role of the Library of Virginia;
- National and state library trends, standards, and developments;
- Local, state, and national laws that affect libraries;
- Local government structure, people, and operation;
- How to work effectively in a group;
- Your duties and responsibilities as a board member;
- Your fellow board members.

To Attend

- Board and committee meetings;
- Conferences of the Virginia Library Association;
- Library of Virginia Trustee Workshops;
- Other regional, state, and national meetings and workshops.

To Plan

- Goals and objectives of the library;
- Future growth and priorities of the library;
- Policies of the library;
- Community-awareness activities and programs;
- Orientation for new board members.

To Support

- Your library and library director;
- The community and citizens you represent;
- Your local governing body;
- Library legislation.

To Act

- To articulate;
- To secure adequate and stable funding for the library;
- To promote your library whenever called upon;
- To make yourself, the board, and the library visible to the community;
- To develop good personal relations with representatives of government.

To Remember

- The library board acts only as a whole unless it specifically authorizes you to act on behalf of the library.
- The board does not run the operations of the library.

ORIENTATION

New members of the board should be provided with information that will help them feel more comfortable with their duties and responsibilities, give them self-confidence as they begin their job, and get them involved early in their tenure. Trustees are more effective if they know how the library functions and what is expected of them.

There are various ways to conduct the orientation to trusteeship. It may be done informally with the library director and board chair meeting with the new trustee to go over a set list of items, or the orientation program may be conducted at a board meeting. Regardless of the form it takes, the orientation program should be planned step-by-step, and the new trustees should know how the introductory activities will be handled. The responsibility for planning and implementing the orientation is shared by the board chairperson, the members, and the library director.

Orientation sessions should start as soon as possible after the member is appointed. It is desirable to schedule the program, at least in part, before the first board meeting. This will give the new trustee an opportunity to get to know the library director, board members, and staff, and to ask questions about the library and its services.

New trustees should:

Meet with the library director to learn how the library is:

- organized and governed
- funded and budgeted
- operated day-to-day
- structured to serve the needs of the community
- linked to other resources and libraries
- related to board of trustees

Meet with trustee representatives to learn about the board:

- type of board, whether advisory or governed
- organization, officers, and committees
- meeting location, schedule, and operation
- responsibilities and expectations
- goals, long-range plans, and projects in progress
- accomplishments
- relationship to library director

Tour the libraries in the system with the library director and meet staff members.

Orientation Kit and Notebook

In addition to the *Virginia Public Library Trustee Handbook*, a new board member needs information about the local library to review and consult. A three-ring binder is a very serviceable format for the board's notebook of continuing activities and reports.

The contents should include:

- List of board members, addresses, and phone numbers
- Bylaws of the board; committee responsibilities
- Minutes of the previous year's board meetings
- Organizational chart for library, including staff levels, pay scales, etc.
- Staff list, including titles, responsibilities, locations
- Policies of library board concerning personnel, book selection, collection development, meeting room use, etc.
- Long-range development plans
- Most recent library annual report, with prior years for comparison
- Statistical reports on circulation, services, etc.
- Current budget and financial reports
- History of the library and its present goals and objectives
- Local laws, charter, and contracts pertaining to the library
- Community analyses, such as census figures, as well as demographic, economic, and employment trends
- Copies of other current documents concerning the library

Does your library conduct an orientation program for new trustees?

Do YOU need a review session on your responsibilities as a trustee?